York Countians get steamed up over old machines

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

YORK — By today's standards, they were primitive at best.

But to a farm culture that knew only draft horse power, or arm-wrenching crank machines, the early gasoline and steam engines were a boon beyond belief.

Nostalgia, a search for roots, and a longing for "the good old days," have stirred renewed interest in the farm machinery of grandpa's day. Thus, for the seventh consecutive year, the York Fair board invited York County members of the Steam Engine Society to share some of their fascinating collections with the several hundred thousand fair attendees.

On April 29, 1909, one Samuel Leibenknecht of Hellam patented the rights to produce a milling machine driven by belt from a steam or small gasoline engine. Leibenknecht numbered each of his individually crafted farm-size grain grinders, finishing some 400 mills before ceasing production.

Gene Brenneman, R2 Dallastown, counts No. 50 of the Leibenknecht mill line production among his priceless possessions. In Brenneman's broad-ranging searches as a collector and auctioneer, No. 50 is the oldest of the machines he's ever come across.

During the Fair's nine-day run, Brenneman and the Leibenknecht mill No. 50 were headlines in the frequent demonstrations of the "way it was" that took place among a neat line up of threshers, old tractors, early grain mills and crushers, and miscellaneous small farm machines.

Unearthed in a state of deterioration at an area granary, the decades old mill was reconditioned by Brenneman, after he had first inventively crafted new parts for the repair. But the prized part of the mill, the hard-to-replace 12-inch diameter stones, were intact and original.

Running off belts from an early model tractor, or from a one cylinder gas engine, the mill's major use was to grind chop for livestock. Shelled grain was poured into a top bin and fed between the two stones turning against each other within the wooden outside structure. Coarseness of the finished grain product was determined by how closely together the two stones were set.

"It takes a long time to sharpen those stones," Brenneman relates. "There's a special tool, sharpened at both ends, used to hone the grooves in the stones that grind the grains."

For the public demonstrations of the mill's workings, Brenneman has several bushels of shelled corn batch roasted at Biesecker's Mill, with delighted spectators eager to purchase and carry home small bags of the finished ground meal.

While Gene is briefing the crowd that has gathered at the Leibenknecht mill, his son Ralph is likely to be spinning a story elsewhere in the display about the background of another of the family's extensive collection.

Bitten early by the old-engine bug, Ralph picked up two broken-down engines at a junkyard when he was the mere age of ten. In the following years, he rebuilt the three-quarter horsepower model but grins as he admits he's still planning to refurbish the larger, one and a half-horse style of the youthful purchases.

An assortment of other collector pieces have been acquired by the pair and restored to like-new condition, complete with shiny paint jobs and decorative lettering and ornamentation.

A one-horse Flinchbaugh engine is a favorite, rescued from a junk truck for just a few dollars, and one of perhaps only a half-dozen in existence across the country. Another Flinchbaugh three-horse engine, dating to 1911, was bought at a local sale.

Down the line-up of small pieces sits an earlier version of the corn planter, a French and Drumgold model, produced by a York firm. There's also an Ontario grain drill, horse-drawn ancestor to the giant seeding machines pulled today by four-wheel drive tractors.

Some time ago, Ralph found an early 1800's model field-size grain thresher, focal point for another demonstration during fair days. Built by a Spangler in York, the wagon-size grain separator was another giant step in harvest efficiency for farmers accustomed to the hand flailing technique.

Each year, the Brennemans hand-bind a load of wheat for use with the century and a half old machine.

At still another corner of the display, a crowd gathers to study Merle Dellinger's corn cracker demonstration.

His one and a half-horse Hercules gasoline engines clatters as it pulverizes shelled corn into coarsely-ground feed. Although the cracker was Dellinger's first acquisition, like several others

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Merle Dellinger pours more corn into his antique "corn cracker", a once-familiar piece of farm equipment that ground corn into coarse feed. Visitors at the York Fair's popular old machinery display took home bags of Mellinger's cracked yellow grain to fill their bird feeders.

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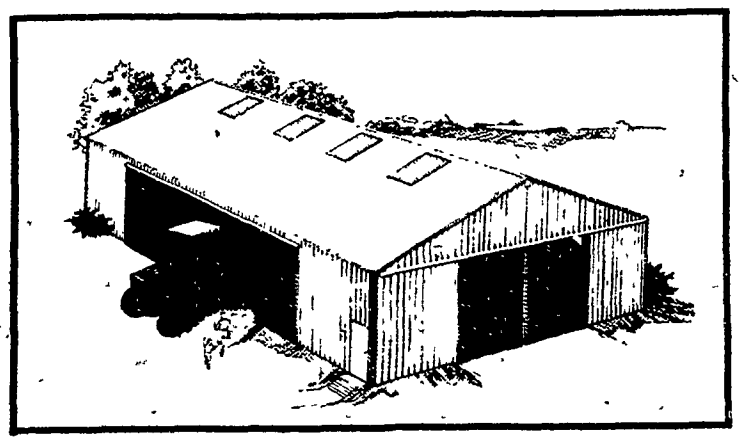

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